

FROM THE NOVEL TO THE FILM: AN EXEMPLARY CASE: *THE GARDEN OF THE FINZI-CONTINIS* BY GIORGIO BASSANI

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Abstract. The purpose of this paper is to find out whether a screenplay can remain faithful to the original literary text. The passage from a literary work to an audiovisual product always involves three authors: the writer, the screenwriter and the film director. There are, then, three different texts (literary work, screenplay and film), each with its own grammar and narrative techniques. As an example, we have chosen *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* by Giorgio Bassani. The analysis of the transition from text to film focuses on two aspects of the transition: changes of the narrative structure and the relationship between literary and cinematographic discourse. As regards the first point, it must be taken into account that it is impossible to achieve the exact reproduction of the narrative sequences; therefore, some of these will have to be excluded, others changed and others added to provide further information. The second point concerns the comparison of the novel's language, the screenplay and the film, analyzing some of the most emblematic scenes of the story. In conclusion, the screen adaptation of a literary work must be regarded as a process capable of transforming literary matter into filmic matter.

Key words: film adaptation, script, screenplay, language comparison, dialogues

INTRODUCTION

The subject of this paper is the film adaptation of a literary work. Every film is based on a screenplay, which represents the narrative structure of the film and should be understood as an autonomous text with its own grammar. The autonomy of the screenplay finds its limit in the case of the cinematographic transposition of a literary work because a literary text has a grammatical and syntactic linear structure that is realized through a dense network of linguistic strategies that are entirely untranslatable into another medium. The paper aims to show that the relationship between literature and cinema has always been complex and contradictory, and the peaceful coexistence of three different authors (the writer of the literary source, the screenwriter and the director) is not always easy.

WHAT IS A SCREENPLAY? WHAT IS ITS NATURE?

According to Syd Field, a screenplay is not ‘a novel, and it’s most certainly not a play’ (Field, [1984] 2005: 19). It is not a novel because in a novel the main character and the reader live the action inside their heads, they share feelings, emotions, words, actions, memories, dreams, hopes, ambitions and opinions. But it is not even a play because the action occurs on stage and the audience, the fourth wall, eavesdrops on the lives of the characters; the story line of the play is expressed in words that describe feelings, actions and emotions.

A screenplay is a story told with pictures, in dialogue and description. It has a linear structure that holds all the elements of the storyline. Field defines the structure ‘like a building or car’ (ibid.: 20), that is a set of parts that are related to the whole:

A story is the whole, and the elements that make up the story—the action, characters, conflicts, scenes, sequences, dialogue, action, Acts I, II, and III, incidents, episodes, events, music, locations, etc.—are the parts, and this relationship between the parts and the whole make up the story. (Field, [1984] 2005: 20)

In his essay *La sceneggiatura come ‘struttura che vuol essere altra struttura’* [*The Screenplay as a ‘structure that wants to be another structure’*], Pier Paolo Pasolini affirms that the screenplay can be considered ‘an autonomous “technique”, an integral and complete work in itself’ (Pasolini, [1965] 2007: 188; trans. mine).

Pasolini’s point of view is particularly original; his whole interest is not so much the screenplay as a means of mediation between cinema and literature but rather the moment when a writer chooses to write an autonomous work according to the screenplay technique. However, he cannot completely disregard the fundamental characteristic of the screenplay and must accept:

[...] come elemento sostanziale, struttura, della sua “opera in forma di sceneggiatura”, l’allusione a ‘cinematografica-visualizzatrice “da farsi”, allora si può dire che la sua opera è insieme tipica (ha caratteri veramente simili a tutte le sceneggiature vere e proprie e funzionali) e autonoma nel tempo stesso.

([...] as a substantial element, structure, of his “work in the form of screenplay”, the allusion to a cinematographic-visualizing work “to be done”, then we can say that his work is both typical (it has characters really similar to all real and functional screenplays) and autonomous at the same time.) (Pasolini, [1965] 2007: 188-189; trans. mine)

And he adds that:

Un momento simile c’è in tutte le sceneggiature (dei film ad alto livello): ossia tutte le sceneggiature hanno un momento in cui sono delle “tecniche” autonome, *il cui elemento strutturale primo è il riferimento integrativo a un’opera cinematografica da farsi.*

(There is a similar moment in all the screenplays (of high-level films): that is, all the screenplays have a moment in which they are autonomous “techniques”, *whose first structural element is the integrative reference to a cinematographic work to be done.*) (Pasolini, [1965] 2007: 189; trans. mine)

In *The Screenplay as Text: Academic Script Writing as Creative Research*, Dallas J. Baker believes that the screenplay as a creative text suffers from an ancient bias that arises from the fact ‘that scripts are not stand-alone works but merely ‘blueprints’ for the films or television programs’ (Baker, 2016: 1). The moderate interest in screenplays on the part of scholars is also due to the fact that screenplays are not usually published, have no commercial value and are difficult to find. The reluctance to publish screenplays means that the study of them is limited. As a linguist, I believe, instead, that the screenplay is a necessary text for the analysis of the passage between the written and the oral media. For this reason, I have started a project to collect Italian screenplays and to make them available to scholars (the project is supported by the Dep. of Political and Communication Sciences of the University of Salerno).

According to Baker, the questions ‘what is a screenplay?’, ‘what is its nature?’ can only be resolved when screenwriting is recognized as creative writing producing works worthy of being published and being, therefore, the subject of a serious academic study. However, despite the difficulties and contradictions exposed in his interesting article, Baker concludes by arguing that:

The reasons for screenwriting’s marginal position in Creative Writing are not fatal ones, they can be ameliorated with a shift in perspective. This shift of perspective is not difficult. It merely entails thinking of screenplays as works of art (texts) in and of themselves and accepting that screenwriting is no more limited by its structure and form than the sonnet or haiku. (Baker, 2016: 12)

THE ADAPTATION

The terms: *transposition*, *adaptation* and *reduction* are used without distinction to indicate the passage from a literary work to an audiovisual product. According to Nicola Dusi (2006), the first two terms cannot be considered synonyms, since they designate different procedures: *transposition* indicates an ordered structure that preserves, for the most part, the coherences of the literary text, while *adaptation* is a transformative process that adapts the literary text to the needs of the cinematographic product. Thus, there would be greater fidelity with transposition and less fidelity with adaptation. However, with an accurate analysis they appear two sides of the same coin, that is two inseparable moments of the transfer process from one artistic form to the other: the transposition would indicate the dynamic phase of the process, while the adaptation, the result phase. The term *reduction* is, among the three, the most restrictive because it

suggests the idea of a *diminutio*, that is, something that is too big to find a place in the narrow dimensions of a film: a problem that is also very concrete, given the average duration of a film.

According to André Bazin (1986), a transposition, to be faithful, does not necessarily have to respect precisely the literary source, but must grasp its spirit, starting from the search for necessary equivalent models. In fact, he argues that the result of a transposition from literature to cinema is a new work that enhances the original source. The statements of the great French critic have only been partially accepted; in fact, some scholars (including Gardles, 1993) believe that there is no equivalence between novel and film, between literature and cinema. Umberto Eco (2003), referring to *Death in Venice* (1971), highlights how Luchino Visconti, while respecting the story, the characters and places of the original narrative, has in fact 'taken inspiration from Thomas Mann's story to tell us his own story'; for this reason 'he believes that it is more correct to consider this kind of transposition 'a transmigration of a theme' (Eco, 2003: 337-4; trans. mine).

Robert Stam (2000) argues that the notion of fidelity to the literary source is a chimera because every reader, with his or her imagination, identifies with the narrated history and constructs a parallel world that has the same credibility as the real world. This relationship between reader and novel is so profound that every transposition is considered a kind of betrayal that cannot be forgiven:

The notion of fidelity gains its persuasive force from our sense that some adaptations are indeed better than others and that some adaptations fail to "realize" or substantiate that which we most appreciated in the source novels. Words such as infidelity and betrayal in this sense translate our feeling, when we have loved a book, that an adaptation has not been worthy of that love. We read a novel through our introjected desires, hopes, and utopias, and as we read we fashion our own imaginary mise-en-scene of the novel on the private stages of our minds. (Stam, 2000: 54)

A writer does not always describe the characters of his work in all their physical traits, which allows the reader to imagine the shape of a face, the eyes, the look, the mouth, the nuances of the hair, the posture, etc. and it is, therefore, very difficult for the reader's imagination to be reflected in the images that different film directors give to the same character. For example, there are millions of Anna Karenina created by the readers but only 5 created by different directors who have produced screen adaptations of Leo Tolstoy's novel.

The author of the adaptation is the screenwriter who, when he/she has to transpose a literary work, must decide what kind of adaptation he/she considers most suitable for the purpose he/she wants to achieve. In principle, three forms of adaptation can be distinguished:

- a) the one in which the narrative articulation is very close to the literary source;

- b) the one in which the reference to the literary work is based only on some essential elements;
- c) the one in which the story, even if starting from some themes of the text, comes elaborated in a completely original way.

Any form of adaptation requires some operations:

- *subtraction*: an imperative that arises for a screenwriter, whenever he/she has to adapt a novel, to reduce its content because it usually exceeds an acceptable filmic duration. Subtraction is a very complex operation and although it may in some cases be forced, it still represents a way of proposing a personal reading of the novel;
- *addition*: aims at capturing the attention of the spectator, such as a more precise characterization of the characters or a detailed description of the places, or even a dramatization of some events;
- *condensation*: consists in the synthesis of two episodes that are distant in the literary text;
- *expansion*: consists in expanding some elements present in a more reduced form in the literary text (for example the dance in the palace of the Prince of Salina, in *Il Gattopardo* by Luchino Visconti [1963]);
- *variation*: takes place whenever it is necessary for the purpose of the audiovisual medium to make some changes to the story;
- *change of position*: consists of changing the order of events.

All these procedures are not so clearly differentiated, but all are available to the screenwriter who adopts them according to his/her interpretation of the literary text. In this sense, the screenplay can be understood as a personal and autonomous work: an unfaithful 'daughter' of the original source. But after the screenwriter, the director intervenes with the freedom to create the story according to his/her sensitivity and his/her narrative technique. In fact, he/she will choose the definitive images through further cuts, additions and variations: the film becomes his/her work, just as the screenplay belongs to the screenwriter and the novel to the writer. Three texts and three authors often disagree with one another, but the screenwriter is undoubtedly the weakest of the three because, while the novel and the film will continue to have their own 'life', the screenplay will remain ignored.

The transition process from written to spoken levels requires some steps (Rossi, 2011: 25) and they are:

- *subject*: initial project of a film or a theatrical play, which may be original or taken from a literary work, which distinguishes episodes and sketches the main dialogues;
- *list*: briefly indicates the order in which the events take place;
- *treatment*: stage of elaboration of an intermediate cinematographic subject between the list and the final screenplay, in which the plot is divided into scenes and their meaning is indicated in the performance of the action;

- *screenplay*: construction of the narrative structure of the film, which precedes the shooting;
- *script*: double meaning term. It is used as a synonym for screenplay or to indicate the written text that contains the parts of all the actors involved in the film.

GIORGIO BASSANI AND HIS 'BETRAYED GARDEN'

Giorgio Bassani (Bologna 1916 – Roma 2000) was a novelist, poet, screenwriter and essayist. He collaborated with newspapers and magazines. His fame is related to the novels that he arranged organically under the title *Il romanzo di Ferrara* (*Ferrara's Novel*).

Since 1954, he has produced several cinematic transpositions of literary works, such as *La provinciale* (*The Wayward Wife*) from a tale of Alberto Moravia and *La mano dello straniero* (*The Stranger's Hand*) from a novel by Graham Greene. Bassani wrote also some original screenplays, such as *I nostri tempi* (*Our Times*) directed by Alessandro Blasetti.

His relationship with the cinema culminated in 1970 because of the adaptation of his most famous novel: *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* (*The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*) written in 1962. One year after the publication of the novel, the rights to the novel were bought by Documento Film and the production was entrusted to Valerio Zurlini who, in addition to directing, had the task of preparing the screenplay with the collaboration of Salvatore Laurani.

When the screenplay was completed, it was sent to Bassani who found it inadequate because it was far from the spirit of the novel, so the project was abandoned. For some years other scripts were proposed but all were rejected, until Bassani was asked to write, with the collaboration of Vittorio Bonicelli, the screenplay of *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*. After a few weeks, Bassani presented the screenplay to the production, specifying two definite conditions:

- the return the screenplay to him after the revision by the screenwriter Ugo Pirro, so that he could make the last corrections;
- the repetition of black and white film inserts related to the capture of the Jews of Ferrara in November 1943, to which the protagonist would have been witness without being seen.

None of this happened: the review carried out by Ugo Pirro, and sent after a few months, had upset the narrative plan designed by Bassani and there was no trace of film inserts.

The difficulty of sharing ideas, due to the co-presence of several authors, each in his role with his own life and work experience, was perhaps the cause of the 'betrayal' suffered, according to Bassani, by his *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* (Bassani, [1984] 1998). The 'betrayal' was even more serious for him because it concerned not only the novel, but also the screenplay he had prepared with the collaboration of Vittorio Bonicelli. Moreover, it was no longer possible

to intervene, since Vittorio De Sica had nearly completed all the shootings. Thus a long civil trial, involving Bassani, Ugo Pirro and Vittorio De Sica, began.

The ‘betrayal’ denounced by Bassani was one of the reasons for my decision to compare the three written texts – the novel and the two screenplays – with the film. I had initially been able to access only the version of Pirro-Bonicelli, which Ugo Pirro gave me a few years ago. But in 2016, thanks to Paola Bassani, the writer’s daughter, President of the Giorgio Bassani Foundation, I received the Bassani-Bonicelli screenplay. This recent acquisition allowed me to know the real betrayal reported by Bassani, but above all it gave me the opportunity to analyze the transformative and linguistic strategies adopted in two different screenplays.

FROM THE NOVEL TO THE FILM: COMPARISON OF THE FOUR TEXTS

The story opens with a prologue set in 1957 in which the novel’s unnamed narrator is out for the day with friends. On their way back from the seaside, the group decides to visit the Etruscan tombs of Cerveteri. The visit to the tombs is a prelude to the description of the Finzi-Contini mausoleum, where only two members of the family are buried: a young child, Guido, who had died of illness before the narrator was born; and Alberto, the son of the Finzi-Continis, the narrator’s friend who had died before the deportation of the family to a concentration camp in Germany. At this point, the narrator reveals that none of the Finzi-Continis survived.

The first part of the book covers the narrator’s childhood experiences, describing the various social circles of the local Jewish population and the mystery around the Finzi-Continis children, Alberto and Micòl. In 1929 the narrator fails his math test, and he takes off on his bike out of fear of his father’s reaction. He ends up outside the walls of the Finzi-Continis’ mansion, where he has a conversation with Micòl, the Finzi-Continis’ pretty daughter.

The next two parts of the book cover the years when the children are all in or just out of college. The racial laws have restricted their social and civil life, and so the narrator, Alberto, Micòl and Giampi Malnate (an older Christian friend with socialist views) form an informal tennis club of their own, playing several times a week at the court in the Finzi-Continis’ garden. During these visits, the narrator declares his love for Micòl. However, her attitude towards the narrator remains one of friendship, and their relationship slowly fades.

In the final section of the novel the narrator describes his futile attempts to restart the romance with Micòl, and his growing friendship with Malnate who perhaps has a secret affair with Micòl.

To compare the different texts I choose the exposition (Table 1) and the resolution (Table 2) of the story. The following table provides a synthetic framework of the differences and transformative operations adopted by the authors in the exposition.

Table 1 Exposition

The novel	1957, trip from Santa Marinella to the Etruscan tombs of Cerveteri. Time jump, description and story of the Finzi-Continis mausoleum.
Screenplay Bassani-Bonicelli	Home of Professor Maldolesi. Giorgio, from a small window, looks at the square where fascists and Germans have rounded up forty Jewish men, women and children. Two military vehicles arrive from which the Finzi-Continis get out and reach the other Jews.
Screenplay Pirro-Bonicelli	External Synagogue: a carriage approaches and stops at the entrance to the Synagogue. Alberto, then Micòl, then Ermanno Finzi-Continis and his wife get out of the carriage. At the entrance, there is Giorgio's father, in the eyelet of his jacket we see the badge of the Fascist Party.
Film	A group of boys and girls on bicycles, wearing tennis clothes, stop at the gate of the Finzi-Continis garden. The servant Perotti goes to open the main door. The boys ride their bikes and go to the big door.

The novel opens with a clear reference to death; it almost seems that Bassani wants to anticipate the fatal conclusion of the life of the Finzi-Continis and of many other citizens of Ferrara, who were victims of Nazi-fascism.

In the screenplay Bassani-Bonicelli, a historical event is described. The absence of these initial scenes in the film is one of the reasons why Bassani felt betrayed; in fact, as we read in the note of the screenplay, he explicitly asked the production to insert repeatedly, almost obsessively, the scene of the round-up of the Jews, which took place after September 8 (Marshal Pietro Badoglio, Italian head of government, proclaims the armistice between Italy and the Allies), in Ferrara in Piazza del Municipio, but his request was completely ignored.

The screenplay Pirro-Bonicelli begins with the scene of the synagogue which, as it is described, is not in the novel. Pirro starts in the past; in fact, the subsequent scenes date back to 1929, when Giorgio is at school, checking the final results of the school year and he finds out that he has failed in mathematics.

The story of the film starts in 1938, following the adoption of the racial laws that excluded Jews from clubs, schools and public jobs. The scene describes the arrival of Giorgio at the gate of the Magna Domus (as the imposing residence of the Finzi-Continis is designated), together with a small group of boys and girls, all invited, like him, by Alberto and Micòl to play tennis in their field. From the first scenes it appears evident that while the fabula remains essentially the same, the plot is different; in fact, the screenplay Bassani-Bonicelli begins with an addition, that of Pirro-Bonicelli with a variation, and the beginning of the film constitutes, at the same time, a variation and a change of position. Bassani's intention was to focus the story above all on the genocide perpetrated against the Jewish people, while in the screenplay Pirro-Bonicelli and in the film the historical events remain in the background, outside the walls of the great park

of the Magna Domus. The following table summarizes the different conclusions of the story:

Table 2 Resolution

Novel	Garden of the Finzi-Continis, outside at night. Giorgio, following, perhaps, a simple suspicion, on a spring evening of 1939, climbs over the walls of the Magna Domus and heads towards the Hütte, a small building used as a locker room that he fears may be the place of the secret meetings between Micòl and Malnate but, at a certain point, realizing the late hour, he goes away. The betrayal thus remains a mere suspicion.
Novel	Epilogue - The novel closes with a bitter memory of the tragic fate of all the members of the Finzi-Continis family. Alberto died in 1942 of a malignant tumor. The entire Finzi-Continis family was captured in the autumn of 1943, deported to concentration camps and destined to die. Finally Giampiero Malnate enrolled in 1941, was sent to Russia, from where he would never return.
Screenplay Bassani-Bonicelli	Giorgio sees Micòl and Malnate from the window of the Hütte, and the truth seems even more tragic when Micòl turns on a small lamp, illuminating the scene. Giorgio goes back home where he has a conversation with his father. They talk about the political situation and also about Micòl. Death of Alberto and his funeral. The final scene describes the moment when the fascists arrest the whole Finzi-Continis family.
Screenplay Pirro-Bonicelli	After discovering Malnate and Micòl in the Hütte, Giorgio returns home where he has a conversation with his father. Death of Alberto and his funeral. Bruno Lattes, Giorgio's friend, is arrested in a cinema. In the last scenes the Finzi-Continis family is arrested and taken to a school where hundreds of Jews are gathered. Here Micòl meets Giorgio's father, who tells her that only he was captured and that his family, including Giorgio, found a safe haven. At the end, there is a sequence of shots of the places where the events took place and, in slow motion, you can see the figures of Giorgio, Micòl, Alberto and Lattes playing tennis.
Film	In the final scenes, the film follows the same narrative line as the Pirro Bonicelli script.

The final scenes of the film, which reflect the screenplay Pirro-Bonicelli, were heavily criticized by Bassani, not only because these were totally absent in the novel, but also because the ending of the film was not respectful of his father, who was never captured by the Nazi-fascists. In *Il mio giardino tradito (My Garden Betrayed)* he writes:

Ma il colmo fu raggiunto facendo partire il padre di Giorgio verso i campi di sterminio nazisti. Capisco che riuscisse comodo sistemarlo così, giusto per fargli dire, alla fine, a Micòl (e al pubblico), che Giorgio, il futuro autore del Giardino dei Finzi-Contini, si era salvato.

(But the maximum was reached by sending Giorgio's father to the Nazi death camps. I understand that he could easily fix it like this, just to make him say, at the end, to Micòl (and to the public), that Giorgio, the future author of the Finzi-Continis Garden, had been saved.) (Bassani, [1984] 1998: 1260-1261; trans. mine)

COMPARISON OF THE LANGUAGE OF THE NOVEL AND FILMIC DIALOGUES

Bassani's criticism of Pirro's revision concerned above all the dialogues that he considered long and didactic, whereas in his screenplay they were shorter and more significant. In *Il mio giardino tradito*, Bassani himself reports in detail a dialogue between Alberto and Malnate, which in his screenplay is reduced to a few words:

I dialoghi abbondantemente alterati: [...] Bastava guardare a pag. 68 della revisione-Pirro. Nel copione Bassani-Bonicelli a pag. 51, la scena finiva con la battuta di Alberto: "No, io non esco". Nella revisione-Pirro il dialogo continuava così: "No, io non esco... E poi, per andare dove?... Se uno potesse scegliersi le facce che deve incontrare per strada... allora sì... Io, invece, ogni volta che sono uscito, mi sono sentito spiato... invidiato... MALNATE: Qui, invece, le facce le scegli tu... è questo che vuoi dire? ALBERTO: No... non proprio... Qui siamo sempre in pochi... non mi sento mai aggredito... Lo so a cosa pensi... pensi che mi manca la gioia di vivere... Ma chi me la può dare?"

(The dialogues greatly altered: [...] It was enough to look at page. 68 of the Pirro-revision. In the Bassani-Bonicelli script on page 51, the scene ended with Alberto's script line: "No, I don't go out". In the Pirro-revision the dialogue went on like this: "No, I don't go out ... And then, to go where? ... If one could choose the faces he has to meet on the street ... then yes ... I, instead, every time I went out, I felt spied upon... envied ... MALNATE: Here, instead, you choose the faces ... is this what you mean? ALBERTO: No ... not really ... Here we are always a few ... I never feel attacked ... I know what you think ... you think I lack the joy of living ... But who can give it to me?"). (Bassani, 1998 [1984]: 1259; trans. mine)

The language of the novel captures the reader; rich in particular details, it introduces the reader to the narrative and requires his/her participation. In the novel, despite frequent dialecticisms and numerous words and sentences in foreign languages, such as French, German, English and even Latin and Hebrew, the language maintains its colloquial tone: it is the language of the narrator, of his memory and his nostalgia. Then there is a special language, only partially reported in the film: it is the language of Micòl and his brother Alberto, defined by Bassani as 'finzi-continico' (Bassani, 1962: 51). It is language rich in neologisms

and cryptic sentences; a sort of code known only to them, which contributes to emphasizing the distance between the two young Finzi-Continis and the rest of the group.

In the film, the lexical richness of long descriptions is replaced by images. Registers in filmic dialogues belong to the colloquial sphere, which oscillates from formal to informal according to the age and social background of the speaker.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, no film adaptation can reproduce the lexical richness of the literary work, where words alone can create a parallel world that is as rich and alive as the real world. Adaptation cannot be understood in terms of equivalence, but only as a process of operations, first realized by the writer and then by the director, capable of transforming literary matter into filmic matter, with the awareness that absolute fidelity cannot exist in the transition from a written work to an audiovisual one.

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FILM ANALYSED

Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini (1970) [Film] Directed by: Vittorio De Sica. Italia: Documento film.

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